DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 717 IR 058 211

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TITLE	The Role of Works of Imagination in Preparing Young People for the Information Society.
PUB DATE	2001-08-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Libraries and Librarians: Making a Difference in the Knowledge Age. Council and General Conference: Conference Programme and Proceedings (67th, Boston, MA, August 16-25, 2001); see IR 058 199.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Information; Childrens Literature; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Imagination; *Information Literacy; *Information Skills; Library Role; Public Libraries; *Reading Skills; School Libraries; World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; *Electronic Resources; United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the place of reading in the acquisition of information capability among young people and considers the extent to which this is nurtured and aided by works of the imagination, whether in print or electronic form. Information capability presupposes a range of skills that, in addition to technological skills and the knowledge to use information sources, includes general literacy. The growing literature on information literacy tends to stress the first two requirements. However, a world of information may be physically and politically available, but this is of no value if it cannot be accessed because an individual lacks the ability to read. Today, works of the imagination are not just confined to print; there are many excellent World Wide Web sites providing works of imagination. Works of imagination in electronic format and the use of electronic facilities in accessing and discussing works also make a valuable contribution to achieving information capability. There is evidence in Australia, for example, that such facilities are encouraging more boys to read. A study in the United Kingdom and Australia is proposed to look at the issues outlined and to link these with provision in school and public libraries. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/MES)

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ED 459 717

67th IFLA Council and General Conference August 16-25, 2001

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Division Number: III
Professional Group: School Libraries and Resource Centres
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 106
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

The role of works of imagination in preparing young people for the Information Society

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to examine the place of reading in the acquisition of information capability amongst young people and to consider the extent to which this is nurtured and aided by works of the imagination, whether in print or electronic form. Though recognition is being given to the fundamental nature of literacy skills there is a dearth of literature that explores the role of imaginative literature in the development of information literate individuals.

It has long been recognised that imaginative literature plays an important role in the acquisition of reading skills, not to mention aiding in the development of imagination, appreciation of narrative and providing enjoyment of story. Reading plays a part in physical, intellectual, language, emotional, personality, social, moral and spiritual development. Imaginative literature helps to develop the heart and mind of the individual. Human beings learn through story.

In areas of information wealth, educational institutions are emphasising the need for information literacy, and programmes evolving along with digitisation are embracing computer and Internet skills. There is no doubt that there is a need for such strategies to empower individuals to survive and flourish in the Information Age, but information power for individuals becomes a reality through the development of information capability to the required level. Information capability presupposes a range of skills which, in addition to technological skills and the knowledge to use information sources, includes general literacy.

The growing literature on information literacy tends to stress first two requirements but these are just part of the picture – what happens if a child or an adult cannot read? A world of information may be physically and politically available but this is of no value if it cannot be accessed because an individual lacks the ability to read.

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Today, works of the imagination are not just confined to print, there are many excellent Websites providing works of imagination. Works of imagination in electronic format, and the use of electronic facilities in accessing and discussing works, also make a valuable contribution to achieving information capability. There is evidence in Australia, for example, that such facilities are encouraging more boys to read.

Despite the obvious link between the use of imaginative literature in developing literacy skills, and the importance of such skills in creating information literate individuals, there is a discernible gap in the literature of the acknowledgment and understanding of the role that works of the imagination play. A study in the UK and Australia is proposed to look at the issues outlined, and linking this with provision in school, and public libraries. The difference between school library provision in UK and Australia creates potential for further exploration.

The aim of this paper is to examine the place of reading in the acquisition of information capability amongst young people and to consider the extent to which this is nurtured and aided by works of the imagination, whether in print or electronic form.

It is said that we are now living in the Information Age. This new age is largely characterised by the developments which have taken place in technology and, in particular, information and communication technologies (ICT). The convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computer technologies, has had a significant impact upon society, comparable with previous major societal changes such as the industrial revolution or the advent of the printing press. The result of the latest revolution is unprecedented globalisation in which instantaneous contact can be made between people anywhere in the world, with all the legal and social issues that raises. The impact is so great that sociologists and anthropologists are now redefining out notions of *community* as the geographical definition becomes decreasingly relevant. The net result parallels again that of former major impacts in that inequalities in society are growing, amongst nations and amongst individuals.

To function effectively in the *Information Society* requires a high degree of literacy and a complexity of skills which is leaving some people behind. An OECD adult literacy survey (OECD, 2000) reported that across twenty countries, one in four adults who participated in the study, do not possess the necessary literacy skills to manage in today's world. It is a reasonable assumption that the study took place in poorer or Third World countries, but this is not so. The sample included the USA, Canada, four Scandinavian countries, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. In confirmation of this statistic Hartman, Draeger and Bernstein (1991 cited in Fisher, 1999 p.56) reported that at least twenty per cent of US adults were functionally illiterate. Between forty and forty-five million people in the US are unable to understand written materials requiring the most basic reading skills (Fisher, 2000 p 57).

Lack of literacy skills on tjis scale causes problems for living, working and for survival in general. Smith (2000 p.378) identifies that there is already a gap between the skills of workers and the literacy demands of the workplace today. Others maintain that this gap will grow wider over the next two decades. Mikulecky (2000 p.380) for example, predicts that an expansion of multiple literacies will be required to navigate higher levels of information presented in a mix of three dimensional and print visuals. The worker of the future will need to acquire ever growing literacy skills to communicate simultaneously across several different work communities. Throughout the literature there are examples of the need for these skills. Hull (2000) Cites a case study in the States where workers in an electronics factory nearly caused a major and costly mistake because they failed to understand written instructions.

It is not only the workplace which demands such skills but in virtually every area of life. Healthcare is one example, Fisher (2000) argues that the pressures on the medical profession mean

shorter stays in hospital and patients being discharged earlier. This requires that patients assume more responsibility for increasingly complex procedures and treatments. In order to make informed decisions patients must have the skills to understand demanding information.

Achieving Information Literacy

If a person is to survive in the Information Age they therefore need to be *information literate*. The examples already discussed demonstrate why is important, but what exactly does achieving information literacy mean? Definitions are still elusive and avidly debated, but it is generally agreed that it is something to do with combining the old *information skills* with the ability to manipulate the new technologies. In fact there is a discernable progression from *library skills* through *information skills* to *information literacy*. We will return to some of these issues later in the paper.

The most commonly cited and concise definition is:

> The ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources (Doyle,1994 cited in Brown, 1999 p.58).

Brown argues that information literacy actually subsumes a wide variety of skills and abilities including: critical thinking, problem-solving, personal, social and communication skills, library and computer literacy (1999, P.58).

In areas of information wealth, educational institutions are emphasising the need for information literacy, and programmes evolving along with digitisation are embracing computer and Internet skills. There is no doubt that there is a need for such strategies to empower individuals to survive and flourish in the Information Age, but information power for individuals becomes a reality through the development of information capability to the required level. Information capability presupposes a range of skills which, in addition to technological skills and the knowledge to use information sources, includes general literacy.

The need for reading skills in achieving information literacy

Many discourses on *information literacy* tend to emphasise technological requirements. The argument in this paper does not dispute that computer and technical skills are relevant or important, on the contrary. Storage retrieval and dissemination and the availability of information has never been quicker nor easier. In fact the preparation of this paper owes much to the ability to locate and obtain material in electronic format by technical means. Technical skills are a necessity in order to survive, but this is just part of the picture – what happens if you cannot decipher what you see on your screen? A *world of information may be physically and politically available* but this is of no value if it cannot be accessed because an individual lacks the ability to read (Wresch 1996 p.14). Whilst it is acknowledged, therefore, that success in information literacy is dependent on information handling and technical skills *reading skills are fundamental* (Royce, 1999 p.145).

We tend to assume that all twelve to sixteen year olds have embraced the new technologies eagerly but this is not always the case. One of my PhD students teaches in the further education sector. She reports a very sad case of one sixteen year old who, after taking computer classes for several months, committed suicide. His problem was that he could not keep up, and the reason was that he did not have adequate reading skills. When he could no longer hide the fact that he was lagging behind, he took the only way out the he could see. This is, thankfully, a very extreme case but reading skills are fundamental to functional literacy.

At one time a person was considered literate if they could sign their own name. Literacy, though, developed way beyond the confines of the religious and the scholarly (Brievik and Gee 1989, p22) and we all know about the various movements around the world to help the general populace to

attain literacy skills, many of us owe our jobs to those movements! Later literacy came to mean skills in reading, writing and comprehension and in the 1950's UNESCO expanded the definition to the ability to use print in order to be able to function in every day life (Harris & Hodges, 1992 p.142). But, literacy is a dynamic concept and gradually, as the needs of society have evolved, the requisites of being able to function within that society have expanded and the concept of literacy has also changed to fit the bill.

In a study designed to reach a *deeper understanding of technological literacy* Gagel found that there was a bi-polar debate with technological skills at one end and literacy skills at the other (1997, p.4). Six *essential themes* emerged from the literacy discussion: *cognitive performance, cultural identity, knowledgeability, language, communication, utility and reading and writing* (p.3). Gagel states:

> Without question, the most common characteristic of literacy, that qualifies as an essential theme was reading and writing (p.4).

Kniffel (1999, p.36) argues that many devotees of the new technologies scoff at the idea of reading, but that the word should be at the heart of every library. In fact the imperative to utilize the technologies effectively creates a greater necessity than ever to be a proficient reader.

Royce (1999) summarizes the importance of reading:

> It [information literacy] all comes back to reading and the twin thrusts of getting readers hooked early in life and providing plenty of practice…you can survive in today's world if you can type with only one or two fingers. You can survive without ever using keyboard shortcuts or realising the full potential of your software. But, …you are going to find survival both difficult and expensive if your reading skills are poorly developed. In this Information Age, reading and reading skills…will enable users not just to survive, but to thrive.

The importance of imaginative literature in a child's development

It has long been recognised that imaginative literature plays an important role in the acquisition of reading skills, not to mention aiding in the development of imagination, appreciation of narrative and providing enjoyment of story. Spink in his seminal work *Children as readers* (1985) identifies eight areas of development in which reading plays a part: physical, intellectual, language, emotional, personality, social, moral and spiritual (pp. 29-42). Imaginative literature helps to develop the *heart and mind* of the individual. Human beings learn through story.

Over a hundred years ago, Charles Dickens in *Hard Times,* set in that other technological revolution, warned of the dangers of suppressing imagination and concentrating on *the facts*. His message is perhaps more true today, when fascination with the latest gadget or software can obscure the need for other kinds of development.

There are encouraging signs that the power of and need for imaginative literature has been recognised. Kibby (2000 p.381) argues that literacy has actually increased more in the Twentieth Century than any other time in history and that in the USA, eighteen year olds are better readers than ever before. The publishing industry is thriving according to Royce (1999, p.145) who cites recent surveys which indicate that more bookstores are opening, book sales are rising and people are generally reading more, despite the emphasis on technology.

Perhaps this viewpoint is endorsed by the *Harry Potter* phenomenon? Is this evidence that works of the imagination are still thriving and necessary? One seventeen year old describing why he was such a fan of Harry Potter wrote:

> I found the Harry Potter books enjoyable to read… I think to enjoy them you have to still have some imagination and sense of fantasy left to explore. The Harry Potter books take you to a part of yourself where you believe in magic…[and] unlock your imagination and let it run free through the many pages of magic and wizadry…(Cawkwell, 2001 p.669).

William Cawkwell is a Year Twelve student teenage boy in New Zealand a group not traditionally renowned for reading fantasy and works of the imagination.

If you are an experienced children's librarian of a certain age, the need for an early start and the benefits of young children being surrounded by imaginative works will be a mantra embedded in your psyche. For over three decades there have been studies, projects and a string of gurus providing evidence of such benefits, yet there has been a new awakening in terms of research in this area. There are many studies which confirm that habits developed in preschool years contribute to literacy in later life (Jordan et al, 2000). A study of the Birmingham *Bookstart* project, in the UK, shows that children who read surge ahead, educationally, of those children who do not (Ghouri, 1997). This study revealed that giving books to babies improved their performance in school, seven years on. Similarly, research on the Kirklees *Babies into Books* initiative also showed that early intervention is important in later development (Hardman and Jones, 1999).

The British Government have taken the need for reading on board as evidenced by the intruduction of the *Literacy Hour* in 1999 (DfEE, 1998). Since then there have been a number of initiatives, such as the National Reading Campaign, designed to foster reading.

The focus of this campaign from May 2001 will be on promoting children's reading to adults. It is widely recognised that creating a conducive environment at home, reinforces the development of literacy skills. This fact seems to have spawned a large number of *Family Literacy* projects which are springing up all over the World. Research at the University of Sheffield by Hannon and Nutbrown resulted in the REAL model, which set out steps for book-sharing (Hannon, 1996). This has given rise to a number of initiatives such as the PRINTS project in Newfoundland, Canada. This project advocates that parents should build in a literacy activity with their children each day (Fagan, 2000).

Developing the reading habit at an early age also engenders a love of reading in many children. Research by Krashen (1993) shows that *Free Voluntary Reading* results in better literacy skills, comprehension and writing, whilst on the reverse side those who do not read voluntarily are poorer at comprehension, reading and other skills. Royce (1999, p.150) argues that schools have a duty to develop good readers. Good readers are characterised by the ability to choose how and what they read. He argues that reading for enjoyment is the key to developing literacy (p.151). It has long been known that good quality works of imagination play a vital role in encouraging reading for enjoyment.

Jackie Marsh outlines further research at the University of Sheffield (Marsh, 2000). In this case the study examined the impact of popular culture on motivating young children to read. A range of resources including characters from television were placed in a 'batcave'. Children reportedly flocked to the cave and the project proved particularly useful in encouraging boys and some children who had been identified by teachers as having little motivation towards literary activities.

Education literature is also beginning to acknowledge the need to attend to emotional literacy. Gerry (2000) argues that understanding emotional literacy is essential in helping young people to develop self-esteem, and to become socially and educationally successful. This is not disconnected with being fitted for the Information Society. He further debates that if you want to get on in life you need to have developed the ability to interact with others and to manage your own emotions and that today's leaders more than adequately demonstrate these skills.

Leu and Kinzer (2000), in predicting the nature of literacy for the new Millennium, stress that social learning strategies will be critical to literacy instruction in the future. And that children need to interact in order to learn from each other Understandings of others takes on a new meaning in a global forum. In order to achieve this, the authors advocate *collaborative learning experiences.* The reason given is that:

> New technologies for information and communication will allow us to look beyond our classrooms, make new connections and see the World in a new and powerful way (p.1).

Written communication skills are also essential in the work place. Dreher (2000 p.382) argues that the social context of literacy activity is being determined by the new technologies and that today's workplace *includes widely distributed worksites connected by electronic links.* Higher education is increasingly taught in distance learning mode. This means increasingly heavy reliance on written communication.

Let us return to Spink's eight areas of development which may be enhanced by the encouragement of reading imaginative literature: physical, intellectual, language, emotional, personality, social, moral and spiritual (1985, pp. 29-42). These seem to cover adequately the requirements above.

Today, works of the imagination are not just confined to print, there are many excellent Websites providing works of imagination. Works of imagination in electronic format, and the use of electronic facilities in accessing and discussing works, also make a valuable contribution to achieving information capability. There is evidence in Australia, for example, that such facilities are encouraging more boys to read. Consequently developing and reading skills may be aided by use of the Web. A school in Clarkesville, Tennessee, for example, recently won an award for using technology to enhance reading skills (An evolving process, 2001 p.24). There are actually huge numbers of stories online, and a wealth of websites that can be accessed by children searching for their favourite authors and characters, including the famous *Harry Potter.* Enos (2000 p.24) proposes that the Web is a sources of stories not available elsewhere. It is certainly a source of classic stories fairy tales and out of print titles.

The role of the school library

It will come as no surprise to those working in or within the orbit of school libraries that there are many studies which predict that, in school, the nature of literacy will depend on the convergence of literacy instruction with networked information and communication technologies (Leu and Kinzer, 2000). Able users of information rely on three basic skills: reading, information handling and technical. There is no argument that a school library has a pivotal role in nurturing and encouraging such skills. Rafferty (1999) advocates an all- school policy on *learning for the information age*, whilst Langford (1999) places the school library firmly in the centre of that process. However, my own research a number of years ago (Eyre, 1999) showed that with changes in funding arrangements and the subsequent tighter budgets, school library budgets tended to be diverted towards material to support the curriculum and away from imaginative works.

But, there is an important role to play in nurturing reading for its own sake. The best predicter of adult reading ability is education. There is a great deal of evidence that *continuous* literacy-related practices in terms of reading and interpretive skills are important from an early age (Sheehan, Holt and Smith, 2000), but this means *sustained* effort at secondary level. Studies show that later attempts to increase literacy at adult level is piecemeal at best, and that there are but limited chances of achieving an adequate level of literacy through adult education. Royce (1999) argues that many people do not improve as readers because they do not practice and need to be encouraged to do this if they are to be prepared for the Information Society. The tightness of National Curricula of many nations precludes reading for enjoyment in the classroom makes the school library the natural place to nurture the reading habits begun in those early years.

Conclusion and the need for research

Despite the obvious link between the use of imaginative literature in developing literacy skills, and the importance of such skills in creating information literate individuals, there is a discernible gap in the acknowledgment and understanding of the role that works of the imagination play. Though recognition is being given to the fundamental nature of literacy skills there are few studies that explore the role of imaginative literature in the development of information literate individuals. Research in the UK and Australia is proposed to look at the issues outlined, and linking this with provision in school, and public libraries. The difference between school library provision in UK and Australia creates potential for further exploration.

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